



2. Preaching Revelation

Predicación de Apocalipsis

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Abstract

There is much scholarly and non-scholarly interest in the Book of Revelation. This article argues that the book must be preached, but this must be done after serious study to avoid superficiality and speculative interpretation. Even as a sermon on Revelation will apply the text to the current audiences' situations, it must be true to the message of the Apocalypse. In this article we will (a) address some basics on preaching, (b) suggest why it is important to preach Revelation, (c) and mention prerequisites for and pitfalls of preaching Revelation. Furthermore, the article contains a proposal of what to preach, providing lists of passages and topics that may be of interest to the preacher. It also offers some examples of outlines for preaching. The article will not be dealing with rhetoric and the delivery of a sermon, but its focus is on content.

Keywords

Hermeneutics – Exegesis – New Testament – Revelation – Preaching

Resumen

Hay mucho interés académico y no académico en el libro de Apocalipsis. Este artículo expone que se debe predicar de este libro, pero se lo debe hacer luego de estudio serio para evitar la superficialidad y la interpretación especulativa. Incluso cuando un sermón sobre Apocalipsis aplique el texto a las situaciones actuales de las audiencias, debe ser fiel al mensaje del Apocalipsis. En este artículo (1) abordaremos algunas cuestiones básicas de la predicación, (2) sugeriremos por qué es importante predicar de Apocalipsis, (3) y mencionaremos prerequisites y riesgos de predicar Apocalipsis. Además el artículo contiene una propuesta de qué predicar, proveyendo listas de pasajes y temas que pueden ser de interés para el predicador. También ofrece ejemplos de bosquejos para la predicación. El artículo no tratará la retórica ni la oratoria de un sermón, sino que su enfoque será en el contenido.



Palabras claves

Hermenéutica – Exégesis – Nuevo Testamento – Apocalipsis – Predicación

After centuries of little interest in the Book of Revelation, John's Apocalypse has been studied extensively for the last decades. People from various faith traditions have shown interest in Revelation. Also Catholic scholars have studied the book exegetically, and in the 1980ies three ladies were quite influential Adela Yabro Collins, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Massynberde Ford. Since then, constantly new commentaries, monographs, and articles appear in print. It becomes difficult to keep up with all publications on Revelation. While there is a lot of interest in scholarly work on Revelation—exegetical and theological—it seems that not very much has been done in the area of preaching the Apocalypse of John. Publications on Revelation and homiletics are rare. Some are older and may be dated. Some focus largely or exclusively on the messages to the seven churches.

Typically, preaching has a major down-to-earth aspect. It must be practical and has to speak to the needs and challenges of the people but also to necessary changes with the audiences. True biblical preaching is based on Scripture but is applied to the present audience.

This is not necessarily what scholarship always does. Scholars may study biblical terms, grammar, syntax, phrases, etc., in order to understand a biblical saying, and theologians may explore biblical concepts in order to build a conclusive system of theology. In their publications they may not deal with what the text means for people today. Depending on their specialization, the nature of the project they are working on, and also their personal preferences biblical scholars may just deal with the question, What did the text or the biblical concept mean for the original audience? Maybe they even ask this question: How should the biblical text be interpreted by us?, but may not show what this means for everyday life. Theologians may, for instance, be satisfied by teaching that God is triune but never ask what difference this biblical concept of God versus the concept of God as proclaimed, for instance, by adherents to Arianism or Islam makes in practical terms for individual believers.

But this does not mean that apart from interest in apocalyptic studies and in Revelation as literature, there is no reflection on implications for the present time among scholars and theologians at all. While some scholars may remain in their ivory towers of intellectual theology, others address issues with which Revelation confronts and challenges us. Because Revelation is not only a book describing past, present, and future events, but is a book like other biblical books it speaks also to our personal Christian life and walk with God and not only to that of people groups and nations. We find, for instance, scholars who address the issue of justice and the reaction toward egregious injustice that Christians have to suffer. There are scholars who speak to the issue of violence—not just by an oppressive system—but also to a potential unwarranted violent reaction by the oppressed. Revelation has something to say about the dangers of political maneuvering and dual allegiance, and some authors address this issue. The same is true for materialism and extreme forms of capitalism in Revelation 18 and how Christians today should relate to money.

Yet even the exploration by biblical scholars and theologians of what the text or the Book of Revelation means is still somewhat different from preaching. Teachers better become preachers when they addresses church audiences or secular audiences that are interested in existential questions. And even then professional preachers may fare even better than the above mentioned academicians.

In this paper we will:

1. Address some basics for preaching.
2. Suggest why it is important to preach Revelation.
3. Mention prerequisites for and pitfalls of preaching Revelation.
4. Suggest what to preach.
5. Provide some examples.

We will not be dealing with rhetoric and delivery of a sermon but with its content.

Some basics for preaching

The meaning of preaching

Before going into detail, it may be useful to remember the ideal and the deeper meaning of preaching. We would suggest several theses:

1. Preaching is based on the conviction that even today the living God is at work in saving humans. Therefore, preaching is part of God's redemptive work.
2. Preaching is the proclamation of the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. It wants to restore the broken communion between God and humankind (Rom 10,13-17).
3. Preaching is not a talk about God, but a talk of God to His people through the human intermediary. But the gospel that is preached is always greater than the speaker.
4. In preaching, the Bible speaks to us. Prerequisites are that the preacher uses Scripture and that he/she carefully studies the Word of God. Preaching seeks to remove the obstacles to a clear understanding of God's Word.
5. Preaching has two focal points:
 - a. The blessings and the will of God
 - b. The needs of His people
6. It is a dialogue between God and His people, in which the preacher belongs to the listening community.
7. Preaching oftentimes collides with the philosophies and cultural values and practices of our time. It proclaims a word that chastises but that also points to divine forgiveness.
8. Preaching wants to lead listeners to action. Individuals are called out of the world, are spiritually nourished, united, and as the church of God are sent back to a world in desperate need of hope and peace.

Preaching should never become a routine. Preachers must lose the respect for God's Word and the awe that they are privileged to speak for and represent the Most High. They have to cultivate an attitude of

humility. As the thirsty they proclaim to the thirsty where water can be found. They do not stand above the Word, but with the hearers they are under the Word. They do not appear with an attitude of having found something but as finding something together with the community of believers. Preaching is absolutely necessary for the life of the congregation (Rom 10,17). Jesus taught and preached.

Approaches to preaching

A word about approaches to preaching. Here we are not discussing issues such as an inductive versus a deductive approach to preaching. Rather we suggest that the Bible is to be the starting point in each and every case of preaching. Christian life is based on God's revelation in His Word and especially in Jesus Christ. Today we know Jesus through Scripture. Therefore, no sermon should be preached that is not based on or at least connected to the Word of God.

However, there are different approaches to or types of sermons:

1. One can use a *biblical passage* which is studied, explained, and applied (e.g., the church in Laodicea).
2. One can deal with a *biblical topic* (e.g., God's throne in Revelation) which is studied, explained, and applied.
3. One may start with a contemporary issue for which there are neither biblical texts nor biblical topics at hand and where one needs to resort to *biblical principles* (e.g., the reaction to violence with non-violence).

All three categories are found in preaching and can be used as one preaches Revelation (see figure 1):

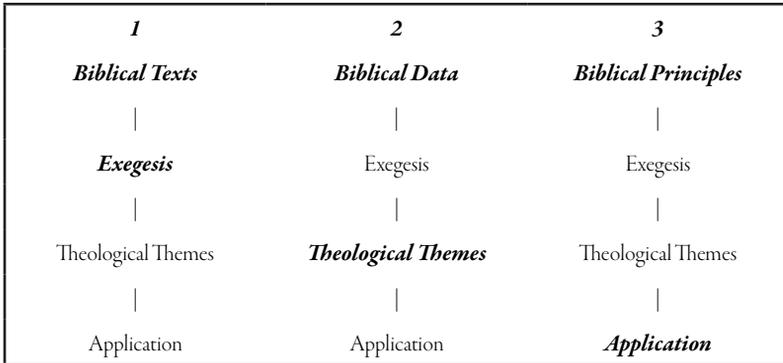


Figura 1. Types or categories of sermons

The first approach is probably the most common one among Adventists. One reads the Bible and needs to understand and explain a text or passage. The focus is on exegesis. Exegesis consists of a number of steps which may help the reader and student of Scripture to unlock the meaning of a text.¹ The most important exegetically steps in addition to praying and reading the passage again and again are the following:

¹ Here is a ten step suggestion of how to do exegesis. This is a summary only. There is much more to be said and done than what appears here:

- Step 1. Take time. Studying Scripture requires time.
- Step 2. Turn to God in prayer for help to understand His Word.
- Step 3. Read the text and also its context repeatedly.
- Step 4. Establish the best possible reading. This is a step for biblical scholars only.
- Step 5. Translate the text if you are a scholar. Otherwise check good translations.
- Step 6. Investigate the historical context and especially the literary context.
- Step 7. Analyze the text/passage under consideration.
- Step 8. Perform theological analysis, that is, look for themes.
- Step 9. Apply the text to us today.
- Step 10. Use resources mainly after having studied the text/passage.

For more information, see Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist theology*, ed. by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 58-104, Ekkehardt Mueller, “Guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 1, ed. by G. W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 111-134; Mueller, “Principles of biblical interpretation,” unpublished paper, 2019.

1. The study of the context of a verse or passage²
2. The careful analysis of the biblical passage itself³
3. The application of the result of the study of Scripture to us here and now⁴

² The historical context consists of the political, cultural, religious, and social situation when a biblical book was written and to which the text was addressed. The literary context consists of the passages preceding and following a text (immediate context), a biblical book, other biblical books (larger context) and the entire Bible (largest context). Biblical texts oftentimes relate to other texts (Old Testament and/or New Testament) and may reveal important themes of the Bible. The literary context determines to a large extent the meaning of words and the message of the passage.

The study of the context may consist of providing a structure of the context. It has also to do with the delimitation of biblical passages. This is especially important in apocalyptic prophecy where the beginning and the end of a passage may be crucial to its interpretation. The study of the context may also take in consideration different literary genres (e.g., legal texts, wisdom literature, classical prophecy, apocalyptic literature, letters). Although the general principles of interpretation apply more or less to all genres, there are differences that need to be taken into account.

³ Analyzing a biblical text or passage includes the investigation of the structure of the text, its literary genre and form, and its larger units, sentences, phrases, and individual words. Consequently, grammar and syntax must be studied. Words and phrases need to be traced through the entire biblical book in which the text/passage is found and sometimes even through the rest of Scripture. However, one needs to keep in mind that words may have different meanings in different contexts, may change over time, and that root meanings are not always useful. Still the tracing of words and phrases may help to determine the main message of the passage and its interconnectedness to other parts of Scripture. Biblical terms must be understood literally unless verse or immediate context indicate a figurative meaning. Furthermore, words must be defined by the biblical context, not by modern usage.

Literary and rhetorical features should be observed such as rhetorical questions, irony, sarcasm, and comparisons. Questions have to be asked: What is the time frame of the passage? What is its geographical location? Who are the important figures and how do they act and speak? What is the main message? An allegorical approach must be avoided. However, biblical typology should be recognized.

⁴ The application must be based on the preceding steps and should not go wild. Here the type of literature has to come into consideration. Some texts are of a permanent nature (e.g., those based on moral law and wisdom passages) while other are not (e.g., those dealing with theocratic laws). In the first case, the application can be direct. In the second case, it has to be based on a permanent principle derived from the passage under consideration.

In a sermon, it is normally better to focus on the most important aspect of the text/passage rather than confuse the audience with many different applications. One aspect of application has been called personalization. Because humans share so much with each other, the text can be personalized on an individual level and on a group level. What does God/Jesus want to tell me with this passage? How does it affect my commitment to Him, my insights into His character and His plan for us, my actions, and my obedience? How can I respond to His message? How does the respective biblical text affect us as a church? In which areas of our church life does Jesus

This first approach is the specialty of biblical scholars but needs to be emulated by all preachers, whether professional or not.

The second approach is a theological (thematic) study. In this case we would suggest to gather biblical data and concepts. They are enshrined in biblical passages. If, for instance, one would study biblical themes such as Christ's second coming or the resurrection of the dead in Revelation, one would have to search the Apocalypse for the respective terms and related vocabulary, e.g., the verbs "to come" (two different Greek terms in Revelation) and the terms "quickly" and "near".

But Revelation contains also symbolic descriptions of the Second Coming, such as the One like a Son of Man coming with the clouds or the Rider on the White horse in chapter 19. They have to be included if the study is intended to be comprehensive. We would also incorporate imagery related to this topic such as the "thief". Therefore, it would be best to read the entire Apocalypse initially and gather whatever is related to the Second Coming. The individual texts or passages are then exegeted before they are placed together for the formulating of a respective theology, in our case a theology of Christ's second coming in Revelation. This second approach is also done by biblical scholars as is the first one. But in this case, an overlap occurs because systematic theologians may also work in this field, especially as they attempt to formulate church doctrines. Because preachers oftentimes preach on biblical topics, they need to develop skills to handle a theological approach.

The third approach deals with issues not directly mentioned in Scripture, which, however, are relevant and that we may need to deal with. How should we, for example, relate to human cloning and artificial intelligence? Is it morally responsible to use public media with all the damage to truth and human wellbeing that they may cause? Do we need to do something about human abuse and human trafficking? What about global warming, ecology, and our responsibility to care for planet earth? In the case of an issue not covered directly by Scripture, the

challenge us? How does the text educate and teach us? How does God use the biblical passage to comfort and encourage us? Our response to these questions can, for instance, be praise and thanksgiving, petitions and intercession, and/or changing our lives and our value system.

preacher should still go to the Bible. He or she has to look for biblical principles. These principles are found in groups of related biblical texts and passages. These passages should be investigated exegetically in order not to misuse them. Then one can extract from them their theological principles which may form the guidelines who can help to make biblical-theological decisions. This third approach is conducted by systematic theologians but must also be handled by pastors.⁵ Typically, the search for biblical principles surpasses the limits of a biblical book.

No matter which approach is chosen, the preacher must determine and formulate the goal of his/her sermon and pursue that goal in a consistent manner. The sermon needs to be outlined so that clarity of thought prevails and the audience can grasp it and be blessed.

The importance of preaching Revelation

Adventist treasure the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. It is no secret that in a biblical commentary series these books sell best among Adventists. But it is relatively seldom that the community of believers hears a sermon on Revelation. And if they do, these are often sermons on the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 and seldom on other parts of the Apocalypse. There are Revelation seminars for the public, but oftentimes these seminars are not so much a study of the Book of Revelation but a course of Adventist doctrines somehow linked to Revelation. And then there are evangelistic campaigns, in which one or two public addresses use Revelation. Typically, they deal with the Antichrist and the mark of the beast. Should Revelation be used more frequently and why? Here are a number of reasons in favor of preaching Revelation:

1. The Apocalypse is the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1,1). It is a revelation that comes from Jesus. Sayings and speeches attributed to Jesus directly and used in direct speech are found in the four gospels, in Acts 20:35—“It is more blessed to give than to

⁵ For an example, not of a sermon but of a church statement that is based on biblical principles, see Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed 11/4/2019, <https://gc.adventist.org/official-statements/statement-on-the-biblical-view-of-unborn-life-and-its-implications-for-abortion/>.

receive”—and in the letter frame of Revelation, that is, in Revelation 1-3 and 22. There Jesus speaks extensively. But Revelation is not only a revelation of sayings that come from Christ but is also a revelation of Jesus Christ. Revelation reveals Christ’s character and work, His status and majesty and does so more than many other New Testament documents.⁶ At the same time, it reveals God the Father extensively and also the Holy Spirit, although the latter is not noticed so much at first glance.⁷ Revelation underlines the divine nature of Christ. The prologue of Revelation summarizes the book in terms of who Jesus is, what He has done, and how He loves us (Rev 1,4-7). We preach Revelation because we preach the Godhead and especially Jesus. The Apocalypse makes an important contribution to the understanding of God and His reign.⁸

2. We preach Revelation because it is the climax of Scripture, the summary of the entire canon, Old Testament and New Testament. The historical and prophetic lines of the Old Testament and the New Testament merge in Revelation to show God’s grand finale of human history and the beginning of the eternal dwelling of God among His people. “In the Revelation all the books of the Bible meet and end”⁹ Revelation tells us where we are in the prophetic outline of time which will end with the Second Coming, and it encourages us to fulfill our God-given mission.
3. The great controversy between good and evil, between God and the evil powers is described with great clarity in the Apocalypse.

⁶ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Christological concepts in the Book of Revelation—Part 1: Jesus in the Apocalypse”, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 22, nos 1-2 (2010): 276-305; Mueller, “Christological concepts in the Book of Revelation—Part 2: Christ’s divinity”, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 21, no 1 (2011): 66-83; Mueller, “Christological concepts in the Book of Revelation—Part 3: The Lamb christology”, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 21, no 2 (2011): 42-66.

⁷ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “O Espírito Santo no Apocalipse de João”, in *Pneumatologia pessoa e obra do Espírito Santo*, ed. by Reinaldo W. Siqueira and Alberto Timm (Engenheiro Coelho, SP: Unaspress, 2017), 321-352.

⁸ This is “theology” in the narrow sense, the teaching of God.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The acts of the apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 583.

We experience this controversy more and more in different societies around the globe today, but also in churches and in our own lives. However, Revelation does not leave its audience in permanent suspense about the outcome of the great spiritual war. It promises victory for God's cause.

4. Revelation provides information that is not found elsewhere. The history of Christianity and also of humanity from Christ's first to His second coming is nowhere described in such detail as in Revelation. While according to Daniel the beastly powers of the Book of Daniel rule from the sixth century B.C. to Christ's second coming, Revelation provides details about church history and end time events not found in such clarity elsewhere, not even in Daniel. This prophetic description shows that human history is not circular, rotating in unending loops, but is linear, reaching an intended goal, the establishment of God's kingdom of glory of which we may be part. This gives meaning to human life. "In the Revelation are portrayed the deep things of God".¹⁰ "The last book of the New Testament scriptures is full of truth that we need to understand.
5. Revelation describes the status of the redeemed and the special group of the 144,000. It allows us to take a look at God's throne, addresses the issue of true versus false worship, the issue of doing God's will or rejecting His commandments, and shows the enormous attraction of evil, the problem of apostasy, and the operation of occultism and spiritualism at the end of human history in unexpected ways. But Revelation does not only teach and enlighten believers, it also calls them to return to God and fear Him (Rev 14,12). We preach Revelation because this unique information given to God's people needs to be shared. E. G. White notes: "The last book of the New Testament scriptures is full of truth that we need to understand".¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 584.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's object lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 133.

The book of Revelation must be opened to the people. Many have been taught that it is a sealed book; but it is sealed only to those who reject light and truth. The truth it contains must be proclaimed, that people may have an opportunity to prepare for the events which are so soon to transpire. The third angel's message must be presented as the only hope for the salvation of a perishing world.¹²

6. Revelation contains teachings that are not found clearly elsewhere, for example, the teachings about Armageddon, the Millennium, the final judgment, and the New Jerusalem. These teachings are crucial for an understanding of anthropology and salvation and the character of God. They enrich our lives. For instance, the denial that there is an everlasting burning hell in which unbelievers suffer forever while believers simultaneously enjoy the restored Paradise supports the justice and love of God. Revelation deals with the difficult topic of theodicy and helps us to understand the justice, holiness, and goodness of God and to have a vibrant relationship with Him.
7. Revelation stresses in a specific way God's activity as Creator and as Savior and connects the two with each other. While ethical behavior plays an important role in the book (Rev 22,15) as well as the keeping of God's commandments, that is, doing His will, it is by grace that we are saved. The redeemed have symbolically washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7,14).
8. We preach Revelation because Jesus Himself has stated that those are blessed who hear and read the Apocalypse and keep what is written (Rev 1,3). And we do so because it assures us not only of hope and the good things to come but reveals the love of God here and now and in eternity (Rev 1,5; 3,9.19) to which we respond with our love (Rev 2,4.19).

It is indeed worthwhile to preach Revelation. This brings us to the question of what are prerequisites for preaching the Apocalypse and what are pitfalls.

¹² Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 195-196.

Prerequisites for and pitfalls of preaching Revelation

We have mentioned above that preaching is a sacred task that has to be taken seriously. We have hinted to the fact that preaching has to be preceded by serious prayer, study, and hard work including knowing one's audience. It means wrestling with the Word of God to see its various dimensions, to understand the intricate connections between passages which at first glance seem to be unconnected, to get a glimpse of the grand themes, and to delight in God's message sent to us.

A worthwhile sermon cannot be prepared in half an hour or an hour. As a rule of thumb it has been suggested that serious preaching of Scripture requires preparation time of thirty minutes to one hour per minute of speaking. In other words, a speech of twenty minutes may take up to twenty hours in preparation.¹³

Unfortunately, some preaching is quite shallow and repetitive, not only because of poor delivery but also and even more so because of poor content. "Take the text as it is (or reads)" is not enough. While the audience needs to be reminded of what the church believes, it also needs to hear new aspects of truth—not fanciful theories—but aspects of truth that are not found on the surface of a text but require some digging. This can create an experience of joy and wonder in the hearers (an "aha experience") because they receive new insights or a deeper understanding of truth. Normally, poor and superficial preaching does not create a love for God's Word in the audience but more likely boredom.

Preachers who decide to explain Revelation must have a good grasp of the Apocalypse. They must know how to do exegesis and theological studies. They must be able to see both the great pictures and the details, the forest as well as the trees. They have to understand the major focus of Revelation which is Jesus Christ and the Godhead and our relation to Him.

We can get so caught up with the beasts and the time spans presented in the Apocalypse, with the Antichrist, Babylon and Satan, with evil

¹³ This has been verified not only with our own preaching but also with students in a course on homiletics who prepare devotionals and present them publicly.

developments, persecution, the death decree, with the disregard for the Ten Commandment, materialism, false miracles and the number 666 and other things that we miss Jesus. But the book is about Jesus, as Revelation 1,4-7 says:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

There is an “eternal gospel” (Rev 14,6) to be proclaimed, gospel—good news. Even the judgment is good news.

Revelation has various features. It is different from other biblical books because it is mainly couched in metaphorical language. Sometimes it shifts to non-symbolic language. How can we find out when it is symbolic and when it is not? Furthermore, the grand themes need to be understood as well as the Old Testament and New Testament background, which help to unlock the symbols. The book contains a letter frame and a large apocalyptic section. It consists of a historical part and an eschatological part. In the historical part recapitulation happens extensively, and in the eschatological part progression comes at times also with some recapitulation. Sometimes it is difficult to decide where a section ends and a new one begins. But the delimitation of a passage may have great influence on its interpretation. Since the book suggests a historicist interpretation, fulfillment of predicted events in history has to be found. But this can only be done after careful exegesis. While in some cases we can be confident of our interpretation, in others we have to remain tentative. That means we have to be very careful, should not assume to have the last word, and must take on humility.

These comments about the intricacies of the Apocalypse are not meant to deter the preacher from tackling the book. Rather they are meant to instill respect for Revelation in the reader, researcher, and preacher. They

are meant to encourage those involved in preaching to familiarize themselves with the last book of Scripture before expounding it, and they challenge us to remain lifelong learners. By the way the book is not only for New Testament scholars but for all of us.

What about pitfalls?¹⁴ Revelation is not to be used as a springboard for conspiracy theories and speculations. While it points out major players in history, it does not provide all details. We need to remain with the text and curb our curiosity and phantasy.

Another issue is time setting for the Second Coming. It is a very sad story that many Adventists—though not the Seventh-day Adventist Church—and also non-Adventists have engaged in time setting.¹⁵ It is constantly around, and after one date has passed and Jesus did not return at the predicted time, already new dates are being proposed.

There is “newspaper exegesis” in which current political, social, and religious events determine the proposed fulfillment of Revelation, but not a thorough study of respective passages of Revelation. Current events change constantly as do the dates set for the Second Coming. While some of these fanciful theories are welcomed by some church members, in the end they destroy the credibility of the Word of God and the credibility of the church. In “newspaper exegesis” and similar approaches it is not Scripture that interprets Scripture. Exegesis of biblical texts does not happen, but a shortcut is taken.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Challenges to the Adventist interpretation of Apocalyptic literature”, *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 13, no 1 (2010): 49-70.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Connie Ordelheide-Anderson, *Decoding the Bible prophecy of the 7 thunders* (no place and no date), 150. Others use soft time setting, claiming that we are the last generation and that Jesus will definitely return in our life time or that the present pope is the last pope. Victor McGowan, *The Revelation and the history of christendom: Prophecy fulfilled to the end of our time* (N. p.: Universe, 2011), sets dates for the historical periods of the seven churches. Based on these dates he concludes: “If a time line is drawn for the church eras, it forms a symmetry of years that may suggest the time of the return of Christ” (McGowan, *The Revelation and the history of christendom*, 19). In a subsequent chart, he lists the year 2019 with a question mark.

¹⁶ When in 1986 the devastating nuclear accident happened in Chernobyl (then Soviet Union, today Ukraine) some people suggested that the name Chernobyl is related to wormwood and that this is a fulfillment of the third trumpet. See, e.g., One Year New Testament Blog, “Revelation 8: Does Chernobyl really mean wormwood? Well... yeah, kind of”, accessed 11/5/2019,

Another pitfall is to give to an apocalyptic prophecy multiple fulfillments or to suggest adding a futurist interpretation to the historicist interpretation which has no foundation at all in the biblical text but is completely arbitrary.¹⁷

Sometimes modern usage of language is employed to explain biblical terms. But the same term used hundreds of years ago and also today may no longer have the same meaning. Languages change in the course of history. They are dynamic.¹⁸

Another and very different problem is that message and person of the preacher must be congruent—at least to a large extent. Through their attitude and lifestyle preachers can prevent people to take seriously what they present, even if it is truth (see Matt 23,2-3).

There are more pitfalls, but no matter which one is discussed, in almost all of these cases the biblical text is not taken seriously or is interpreted not through Scripture but by current day events, philosophy, modern understanding of language or present cultural conventions.

So, preachers of Revelation are encouraged to study Revelation seriously and stay away from possible pitfalls.

What to preach from Revelation?

What to preach is a relevant question. It should be supplemented by the question what not to preach? We would suggest to be sensitive to the audiences that we address. In addition, it matters how we address the respective topic. Generally speaking, everything can be preached, but here

<https://oneyearbibleblogentry.blogspot.com/2012/01/revelation-8-does-chernobyl-really-mean.html>. McGowan, 40-51 suggests that the first of the seven plagues stands for syphilis, the second for Muslims controlling the Mediterranean Sea, the third for the Thirty Years War, the fourth the period from sun king Louis XIV to Napoleon, the fifth for papal darkness, the sixth for the three frogs of Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin, and the seventh for World War II.

¹⁷ See Erwin R. Gane, *Trumpet after trumpet: Will Revelation's seven trumpets sound again?* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2012). After the publication of this book, Pacific Press Publishing Association refused to publish his full commentary on Revelation due to the approach that he took.

¹⁸ This is a problem with the King James Version. The term “meat” then designated food, and “gay” meant “happy” and “lively”.

are some considerations which may help us to choose diligently and under prayer what to preach:

1. First, do we have to take into consideration where people are in their faith development and what they know about Christ and Christianity? Does it matter if people have committed their lives to Jesus Christ, and can we be more explicit with them as with Animists or Hindus, to mention just two of many people groups? Should we preach to people, who hardly know Christ and Christianity, the sea beast or the mark of the beast or should we preach Jesus, His life, His teachings, and salvation offered to us through Him? If the latter is the case we have to choose respective texts and topics which address the uniqueness and beauty of Jesus in Revelation.
2. Second, when it comes to church members should be publicly preach each and every passage in Revelation or should we keep some, for instance, for a Sabbath afternoon seminar to which we invite those that have a marked interest even in the difficult passages of Revelation? The seven trumpets are quite challenging, and there are a number of different interpretations among Adventists. If they are based on a historicist approach, they do not need to be rejected right away. But the multiplicity of interpretations can confuse believers. The trumpets may be a topic for church members with a distinct interest. This group is not the majority. While most Adventists appreciate Revelation, some strongly dislike the book and avoid even a discussion in Sabbath School. They would not be interested in the disputed texts and passages. Revelation 17 is a similar case.
3. Third, while Adventists have a message for other Christians, should this message be presented in an offensive way? While we have an issue with some Christian churches and their teachings, we respect individual believers. After having become friends we can challenge them. But slander and public scorn is not appropriate. Therefore, we may have to be careful how to present publicly Revelation 14, 17, and 18.

So what should we preach? In our response, we will differentiate between texts and passages of Revelation, themes of the book, and issues

not explicitly spelled out in Revelation.¹⁹ But again we have to keep in mind what the true focus of Revelation is Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, the plan of salvation, the final triumph of the kingdom of God, goodness, love, joy, and eternal *shalom*. Sinclair writes:

In contrast to the secular perspective of “progress” Revelation offered the perspective that in the end things in this world would not get better but catastrophically worse. Yet for Revelation this devolution did not necessitate either cynicism or despair. History has a transcendent goal, and no matter how terrible things may turn out in this age, God’s will is being realized and salvation will surely come. [...] Revelation suggests that progress in this age is not crucial. What is crucial is that God is unspeakably glorious, that he has an eternal plan, and that that plan will be realized regardless of human evil. What is important is for us to focus on that plan. [...] Could it be that the only way we will be able to improve this world fundamentally will be to realize more deeply Revelation’s vision that this life is only a prelude to final union with God in Christ?²⁰

Preaching passages and texts of Revelation

Here are passages and verses of Revelation that may lend themselves to preaching. They are not comprehensive but just a suggestion, taking in account the above mentioned limitations and the major focus of the Apocalypse:

1. The prologue of Revelation: Revelation 1,3-8 (Trinity), 1,4-7 (Jesus) or 1,4-8.²¹
2. Jesus in the introduction to the messages to the seven churches: Revelation 1,9-20.
3. Jesus’ messages to the seven churches: Revelation 2-3 (individually or in an overview).

¹⁹ See the three types or categories of sermons above.

²⁰ Scott Gambrell Sinclair, *Revelation: A book for the rest of us* (Berkeley, CA: Bibal Press, 1992), 155-156.

²¹ If verse 8 is added, it should be noted that this verse speaks about God the Father (see verse 3), not about Jesus.

4. The introduction to the seven seals: Revelation 4-5 (chapters either individually or together).²²
5. The sixth seal: Revelation 6,12-17 (Jesus' second coming and the preceding heavenly signs).
6. Jesus as Lamb and Shepherd of the great multitude: Revelation 7,9-17 (see Rev 21,3-4).²³
7. Washing clothes in the blood of the Lamb: Revelation 7,14 (*cf.* Rev 22,14 ESV, not NKJV).²⁴
8. The two witnesses: Revelation 11,3-13 (the Word of God in its Old Testament and New Testament form).²⁵
9. The seventh trumpet: Revelation 11,15-18 (Kingdom of God and Christ: summary of the rest of Revelation).
10. The great controversy and Jesus: Revelation 12.
11. The satanic trinity and the Messiah: Revelation 12-14 (an overview of the central vision without going into details).
12. The 144,000 and Jesus: Revelation 4,15 (see Rev 6,17-7,8).
13. The message of the three angels: Revelation 14,6-12 (the eternal good news; *cf.* Rev 18,2-4).
14. The blessedness of those dying in the Lord: Revelation 14,13.
15. The redeemed and the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb: Revelation 15,1-4.
16. Jesus as Lord of lords and King of kings: Revelation 7,14 (see 19,16 and its context).

²² Revelation 4 is probably the most important throne vision of Revelation. Revelation 3,21 prepares for it. Revelation depicts the enthronement of Jesus as Priest-King after His ascension.

²³ Although the two scenes are similar, they are not identical. Revelation 7b may play in heaven probably during the Millennium, while Revelation 21,3-4 play on the new earth.

²⁴ See the similarity but the different tenses for the term "to wash".

²⁵ See Ekkehardt Mueller, "The two witnesses of Revelation 11". *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 13, no 2 (2002): 30-45. Notice verse 8, the only text in Revelation that mentions directly Jesus' crucifixion.

17. The marriage and the wedding banquet of the Lamb: Revelation 19,7-9 (see Rev 3,20).²⁶
18. Jesus as rider on the white horse and as the Word of God: Revelation 19,11-18.
19. The redeemed as priests of God and Christ during the Millennium: Revelation 20,4-6.
20. The Millennium: Revelation 20 (cf. Rev 7,9-17).
21. The new earth and the new Jerusalem with God and Jesus: Revelation 21-22,5.
22. Seeing God: Revelation 21,3-5.
23. The epilogue and Christ's multiple promises of His coming: Revelation 22,6-20.

Preaching topics of Revelation

There are topics that can be studied which remind us of systematic theology. They have a direct impact on teachings of the church. There are also other topics which pop up in Revelation and which are very interesting und good to preach about either in series of sermons or in one sermon by way of an overview. For some but not all subjects we have provided some literature.

Topics close to systematic theology

1. Theology (teaching of God)
2. Christology²⁷
3. Pneumatology²⁸
4. Anthropology

²⁶ Revelation 3,20 uses the cognate verb of "supper" in Revelation 19,9.

²⁷ See footnote 15.

²⁸ See footnote 16.

5. Ecclesiology²⁹
6. Second coming³⁰
7. Sanctuary
8. Creation³¹
9. Salvation
10. Law and obedience
11. Mission³²

Topics more or less unique to Revelation

1. Seven beatitudes in Revelation
2. Promises to the overcomers
3. Hymns in Revelation³³
4. Imagery in Revelation³⁴
5. Worship in Revelation
6. Parody, imitation, and counterparody³⁵

²⁹ E.g., Philip L Mayo, “Those who call themselves Jews: The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John”, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006); Olutola K. Peters, *The mandate of the church in the Apocalypse*, Studies in Biblical Literature 77 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005); Ekkehardt Mueller, “Introduction to the ecclesiology of Revelation”, in *Pensar la iglesia hoy: hacia una ecclesiología adventista*, ed. by G. A. Klingbeil, M. G. Klingbeil, M. Á. Núñez, 147-164 (Libertador San Martín, ER, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002; Mueller, “The end time remnant in Revelation”, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, nos 1-2 (2000): 188-204.

³⁰ E.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, “Jesus and His Second Coming in the Apocalypse”, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, nos 1-2 (2000): 205-215.

³¹ E.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, “Creation in the Book of Revelation”, unpublished paper 2019.

³² E.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, “Mission in the Book of Revelation,” in *Message, mission, and unity of the church*, Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology-2, ed. by Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2013), 129-153.

³³ One can address all the hymns in the book or the seven hymns in the seal vision or the five hymns in Revelation 4-5.

³⁴ See, e.g., Labahn, Michael and Lehtipuu, Outi. *Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology (Leuven: Peters, 2011).

³⁵ Sophie Laws, *In the light of the Lamb: Imagery, parody, and theology in the Apocalypse of John*, Good News Studies 31 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988); Joe E. Lunceford, Parody

7. Women in Revelation³⁶
8. Evil in various forms
9. The Antichrist
10. The false prophet
11. Babylon³⁷
12. Occultism, demonic animals, and magical motives³⁸
13. Falsehood and deception
14. Wealth, capitalism, and materialism
15. Mouths in Revelation
16. Suffering and persecution³⁹
17. Death
18. Divine justice and vengeance⁴⁰
19. The goodness of God's judgment

and counterimaging in the Apocalypse (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

³⁶ For this topic and others, see James L. Resseguie, *Revelation unsealed: A narrative critical approach to John's Apocalypse* (Leiden, Paises Bajos: Brill, 1998).

³⁷ E.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, "Babylon's terminology in Revelation", in *The Word: Searching, living, teaching*, vol. 1, Biblical Research Institute, ed. by Artur A. Stele, 131-145 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015); Mueller, "Revelation's Babylon and its characteristics" in *The Word: Searching, living, teaching*, vol. 1, Biblical Research Institute, ed. by Artur A. Stele, 147-161 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015); Mueller, "Babylon identified" in *The Word: Searching, living, teaching*, vol. 1, Biblical Research Institute, ed. by Artur A. Stele, 163-176 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015).

³⁸ E.g., Rodney Lawrence Thomas, *Magical motifs in the Book of Revelation*, Library of New Testament Studies 416 (London: T & T Clark, 2009); Ekkehardt Mueller, "Evil powers and occult practices in the Apocalypse", in *The church, culture, and spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed. by Kwabena Donkor, 105-129 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011).

³⁹ E.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, "Revelation's perspective on persecution", in *The great controversy and the end of evil: Biblical and theological studies in honor of Ángel Manuel Rodríguez in celebration of His seventieth birthday*, 251-262, ed. by Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015).

⁴⁰ Joel Vobel Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 17 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993); Ekkehardt Mueller, "Justice is coming: Answers to basic questions about the Millennium", *Adventist World*, August 2016, 22-23.

*Preaching about issues not directly addressed
in Revelation*

We have already indicated that modern issues that are not directly addressed in Scripture have to be solved by finding and applying biblical principles. This is easier if we have the entire Bible available to draw from rather than limiting ourselves to one biblical book, in our case, Revelation. Still we believe it can be done in some cases. We have in mind the following issues:

1. Christian non-violence
2. Human trafficking

*Examples of preaching
Revelation*

**Preaching on passages/texts
of Revelation**

We have mentioned Daniel Russell, *Preaching Revelation*, above. For a number of his chapters, Russell provides a very short exegetical part before he moves to the sermon outline. His sermon outline for Revelation 18, which deals with the judgment of Babylon as a city, is presented below. He takes Babylon to be Rome and quite likely pagan Rome. While we do not share this position, still the outline of his sermon is interesting.

It comes with an introduction of the “powerful spell” of Rome.⁴¹ The main body of his sermon consists of four points followed by a few explanations. It ends with two lessons. His main points on Revelation 18 are:

1. John was impressed by the Power of Rome...
2. John was impressed by the Wickedness of Rome...
3. John was impressed by the Influence of Rome...
4. John was impressed by the Certainty of Rome’s Destruction...

⁴¹ Russell, *Preaching the Apocalypse*, 208.

His two lessons stress “the profound responsibility of the church in a great city” and the individual in view of the passing away of the world.⁴²

Preaching topics

A study of worship mainly in Revelation 4-5 has led to the following results which need to be fleshed out in a sermon. These results are not just theological statements that must be explained in practical terms. To these points an introduction and conclusion needs to be added to have a full sermon.

1. True worship is theocentric.
2. True worship is trinitarian.
3. True worship maintains the tension between God’s immanence and his transcendence.
4. True worship extols the character and nature of God.
5. True worship praises God for his mighty works.
6. True worship is objective, not only subjective.
7. True worship is universal and all-encompassing.
8. The completion of the plan of salvation is set into a worship setting.
9. True worship provides a new perspective to life on earth.
10. True worship is continuous and unending.⁴³

Here is a second example, an outline on the topic of lying in Revelation:

Lying in Revelation

- I. Encountering the culture surrounding us
- II. The lie and the Book of Revelation
 1. Texts in Revelation about lying

⁴² *Ibid.*, 209-212.

⁴³ Ekkehardt Mueller, “Reflections on worship in Revelation 4 and 5”, *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter* (July 2012), 1-6.

- a. False prophets, false apostles, and Jews who are liars
 - b. Consequences for liars
 - c. No lie among the 144,000
2. Facts about lying
- a. If there is the lie, there must be truth
 - b. It is extremely dangerous to lie
 - c. Lies and deception threaten the Christian community
 - d. Lying comes also as a system
 - e. We are responsible for lying (including an illustration of absolute truthfulness)
 - f. We are responsible for accepting a lie
 - g. There are those who have distanced themselves from the lie

III. The lie and we

1. What is lie and falsehood?
2. The church, the believer, and the lie
 - a. Plagiarism
 - b. Conspiracy theories
 - c. The numbers game
 - d. Avoiding disadvantages
 - e. Double standards
 - f. Christian conduct
 - g. The disintegration of Christianity and divine truth

Conclusion

1. Denouncing the lie in each and every form.
2. Commitment to the truth in all forms, especially the personified truth, Jesus our Lord.

Preaching on issues not directly addressed in Revelation

Some preliminary thoughts on the two issues above. This needs to be further developed. Revelation seems to have enough material to allow for

a definite conclusion. However, one has to keep in mind that much of Revelation is expressed in symbolic language.

In the case of non-violence of believers, we would have to start with Jesus, who is presented as Lamb twenty-eight times in Revelation. This is his dominant designation and only found in the apocalyptic part of Revelation. The Lamb occurs for the first time in Revelation 5,6 but is preceded by the Lion in verse 5. Jesus is both Lion and Lamb. Interestingly, John hears about Jesus being victorious through the image of the Lion, but as soon as he looks he does not see a lion but the Lamb. The image of the Lion is superseded by the image of Jesus the Lamb who was “slaughtered” and still looks slaughtered although He is alive. The message of Revelation is very clear. Jesus has won the victorious through vicarious suffering not by violence. This is the divine miracle. When Jesus is portrayed with a sword coming out of His mouth, the sword is the Word of God. And when He wears a blood-stained garment it is not necessarily the blood of the enemies that has stained His garment. It could be His own blood shed on Calvary which brought about the victory.

From Jesus we have to move to His followers, from Christology to ecclesiology. In any case, his followers are also “slaughtered” as He was and is. They are killed from chapter 2 on. Many of them die as martyrs and follow Jesus’ example and His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, His challenge to non-violent behavior. The war they are involved in is a spiritual war and not a physical war. Biblical principles: Jesus’ life, teachings, and death; the disciples follow the example of the master; in Revelation only evil powers kill and thereby transgress the Ten Commandments, which are kept by the believers.

Human trafficking is a modern plague and goes along with sexual abuse. Revelation may address the issue when in chapter 18 among Babylon’s merchandise humans, souls are found. End-time Babylon seems to trade humans. This is clearly condemned because Babylon undergoes judgment and God brings about justice. The value given to human life in Revelation is a further indication that human trafficking and exploitation are unacceptable in God’s sight. Those involved will be judged, and the oppressed will come free to live with God forever, if they have committed

their lives to Him. Revelation also teaches that the prayers of the saints for deliverance from persecution and suffering will be heard and answered in God's time (Rev 6,10; 8,3-5).

Conclusion

Kelly observes:

Revelation is an overarching survey of the final victory of purity and beauty of the Triune God over the impurity and ugliness of sin, death and hell. This remaking of a twisted creation into the beautiful rightness of a renewed one, was, is now being, and finally shall be, fully accomplished through the blood of the Lamb 'slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev. 13:8).⁴⁴

“Revelation is primarily about Jesus Christ; He is the hero of all ages. Satan, though real enough, is finally a minor note in this divinely orchestrated symphony”.⁴⁵ If this is true, and we believe it is, then let us preach this message of Revelation with full conviction and zeal.

⁴⁴ Kelly, *Revelation*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 12.